

KAELI 2002-03 Research Outcomes

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Purpose

The purpose of this research is to examine the first year of the Kentucky Adult Educators Literacy Institute administered through CCLD. The mission of KAELI is to design and deliver research-based professional development about Literacy Levels 1 and 2 to adult educators in Kentucky through a yearlong, graduate-level program. This evaluation sought to evaluate the effectiveness of KAELI in its first year to

1. provide and deliver appropriate course content,
2. identify and address the needs and concerns of adult educators participating in KAELI,
3. develop program managers who support KAELI, and
4. know about the adult learners who participate in KAELI educators' programs.

Through this formative evaluation, findings were provided to the Institute directors throughout the year to assist in the continuous assessment and revision of KAELI 2002-2003 and planning of the second year of KAELI.

Background

The first enrollment of KAELI comprised 68 Department for Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL)-employed adult educators from 40 Kentucky counties. They studied from May 2002 to May 2003 in three cadres, one each at Eastern Kentucky University, the University of Kentucky, and Western Kentucky University. These three cadres shared the same syllabus (collaboratively developed by the respective cadre directors) and core texts. The curriculum focused on helping the adult educators implement literacy instruction that is based on understanding 1) the reading and writing processes, 2) the links between reading and writing for literacy, 3) the adult as a learner, and 4) the effectiveness of a learner-centered classroom. The cadres met individually and as a whole during the KAELI year. The entire group reunited in May 2003 for a collaborative Culminating Day at which each adult educator presented a round table highlighting work developed through KAELI. Between seminars, educators worked individually on the KAELI assignments via a distance education, online WebQuest; held online discussions of the curriculum; made peer visits; and were in turn visited by one of the KAELI university-based instructors.

Methodology

Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, a team of six researchers, two for each KAELI university, conducted pre- and post-Institute teacher efficacy surveys of reading and writing, observed all KAELI seminars, and analyzed syllabi, online discussion boards, and written assignments. In addition, 20 case studies of individual adult educators from a diversity of program types were completed. Each KAELI university instructor was interviewed in depth. Finally, DAEL data for counties with educators enrolled were examined to establish a baseline about current student enrollments and outcomes.

Findings

KAELI adult educators emerged from the Institute more confident in their abilities to teach reading and writing, with a wider area of specific literacy concepts and practices they knew how to use, with an increased willingness to take risks in their instructional practices, and with a better understanding of a learner-centered classroom. A number reported markedly improved literacy outcomes for their adult learners as a consequence of their own changed practices.

Interview and efficacy survey data document that KAELI adult educators became significantly more confident that they know specific techniques for teaching reading and writing and are able to implement these strategies with a variety of learners. Among others, these include pre-, during-, and post-reading comprehension techniques; scaffolding and decoding techniques to support emergent readers and writers; the use of a variety of genres of texts; and online research and writing. The classroom use of technology increased, particularly by students conducting inquiry projects.

All KAELI educators benefited from the introduction of text sets, a collection of books that ranged from illustrated children's literature through novels, poetry, biography, short essay, and other nonfiction. Each educator was required to use these during KAELI to develop and implement lesson plans. In the process, they learned how to match adult learners with texts based on abilities, goals, and interests, and how to use a variety of types of texts to stimulate critical reading, inquiry, and writing. They experimented with individual and group instruction, reading clubs, and lending libraries. Some educators commented that they themselves became better readers in the process, making them better teachers.

Many KAEI educators noted that their new use of real literature and nonfiction instead of textbooks and workbooks stimulated their adult learners to read more and to initiate reading activities at home and in school. Anecdotal evidence indicates that reading assessments of these learners show marked improvements. One challenge continued to be the irregular attendance of many adult learners, which made the use of novels difficult for group instruction.

A core concept taught in KAEI is that instruction should be learner-centered. For adult educators, this means acknowledging that adult learners come to the classroom with a breadth of experience and knowledge. Good instructional practice builds from what the learner already knows and what the learner wants to know. Motivation to learn is key to success. Adults learn literacy skills through engagement with and production of authentic texts. KAEI educators practiced developing lessons from the questions of learners; using authentic issues, texts, and assessments; encouraging learners to produce and publish authentic texts such as letters, book reviews, poetry, and essays; relinquishing some of their control of the classroom so that learners would teach each other; and insisting also that learners take responsibility for their learning. As a result, attendance and learning improved.

A yearlong, intensive professional development program is both challenging and rewarding for those who complete it. KAEI required its participants to read extensively in the conceptual and methods literature on literacy instruction, to review many genres of texts that can be used with adult learners, and to implement and then critique lesson plans with their learners. This was more work than anticipated by the participants, even though the assignments were designed to be complementary to and integrated in their daily work as adult educators. However, those who completed the course understood and benefited from the cumulative logic of the assignments.

Sustaining motivation across the year proved a challenge due to issues with communication, isolation, and demands on time. KAEI combines the use of distance education technologies with occasional face-to-face sessions. Not all participants had experience with online classes or electronic discussion boards. Given both severe winter weather conditions and university central computer problems, each cadre experienced interruptions in the flow of communication. The geographic isolation of many adult educators compounded their initial feeling that they did not have a support network with whom to discuss their work.

Finally, work demands on their time competed with time to complete KAEI assignments, with the former taking priority. KAEI directors made extraordinary efforts to reach out to those participants who seemed most isolated or challenged by the course.

KAEI adult educators cited an improved network of professionals who can support each other in their work as another benefit that emerged from the Institute. By having studied intensively with other adult educators around the Commonwealth, these educators now have literacy concepts in common with each other, and can *and do share and problem solve their implementation across a variety of learners and contexts. Those who enrolled in KAEI together with other educators from their program or county were best able to collaborate on learning new theories and concepts and then implementing new instructional strategies. Already during KAEI, participants began to disseminate their new knowledge with other adult educators in their own and neighboring literacy programs.*

Recommendations

KAEI was a highly successful professional development program in its first year. Adult educators who completed the program left more confident and better able to teach literacy to adult learners. Recommendations pertain to improving the delivery of KAEI and to building on its success to date.

For KAEI directors and instructors:

- Continue to provide intensive professional development in literacy for adult educators.
- Expand the text set options.
- Communicate regularly (biweekly) online and face-to-face throughout the year.
- Provide clear guidelines at the outset of Institute requirements, assignments, and expectations.

For KYAE, CPE (formerly DAEL):

- Provide ongoing, regular professional networking opportunities.
- Work with the universities to improve the infrastructural supports to the directors, including registration and technology supports.
- Support future research that will track the long-term effects of this professional development on the adult educators and their adult learners.